

FOR THE FEW PEOPLE WHO KNOW OF Victoria's Mitchell River, walking there is rarely their first thought. Running from the bogs of the High Country to the Gippsland Lakes, the river's limited fame is primarily among paddlers, for whom its shuttle-like rapids provide challenges of grade-3-4 rapids separated by idyllic stretches of flat water. But this is a river that can be enjoyed from angles other than atop it. At its edge, running for almost the length of the Mitchell River National Park, is a walking track, a dry

platform from which to observe one of Victoria's great rivers. Fed by such famous High Country waters as the Dargo and Wonnangatta Rivers, it is the only major Victorian river to flow freely from source to sea. Yet it remains an uncrowded beauty, neither high country nor low, part mountains and part forest. It's an in-between land, both in landscape and walking effort. Stretching just 18 kilometres, the Mitchell River walking track packs a few pinches and punches but

it's ultimately a comfortable walk that can be ploughed through in a day or—infinitely better—broken into two days. We began at the park's northern end at Angusvale, a field of grass as open as its name would suggest. Mitchell River National Park stretches south from here, forming a green spot on the map and a green antidote to the coal haze of the nearby Latrobe Valley. When it was formed in 1963 it consisted of only 143 hectares; in 1986 the park was expanded to cover nearly 12 000 hectares, cut into

almost symmetrical halves by its eponymous river. On a breathless day at Angusvale the water of the Mitchell River was like ink—black, thick, seemingly unmoving—reflecting the autumn show of its banks. Poplars, willows and other deciduous imports lined the river, in defiance of the area's status as National Park. It was attractive regardless, and doubly so when reflected on the surface of the dark river. The show was also short-lived. There was the occasional rogue willow

downstream, but otherwise the river quickly adopted its natural pose, fringed by melaleucas and rising up the gorge as eucalypts. At first we followed a road along the river, potholed and rough to any transport but feet. The birds of the forest bipped like a convoy of reversing trucks and the river was as placid as sleep. But as we neared the end of the road and the beginning of the walking track proper at the Rock Creek camping area, the hills began to close in, their slopes

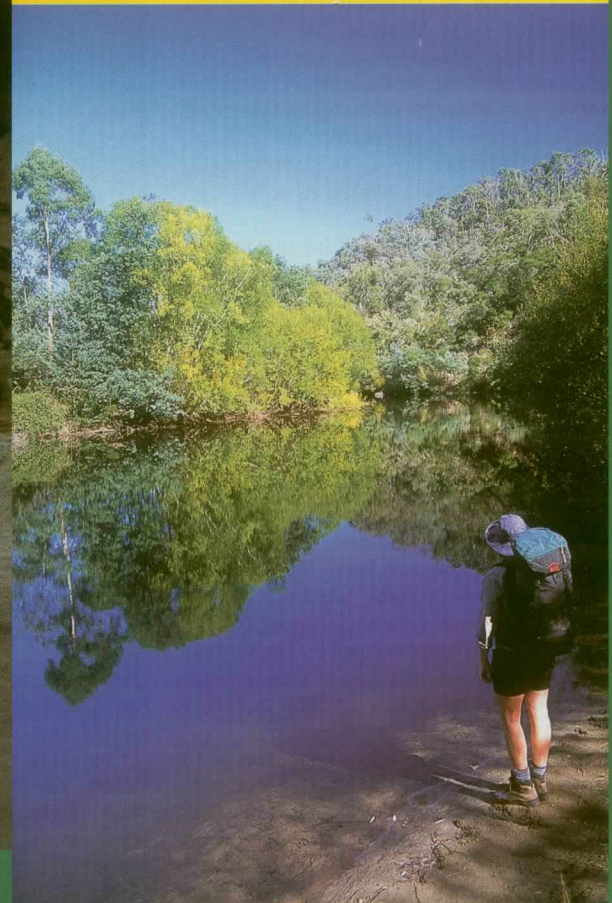
ribbed with sandstone escarpments, and the sound of rapids came at us. What had until now been our private *On Golden Pond* suddenly became a narrow neck of rushing rapids—a favourite slalom run among paddlers—pinned by banks of rocky platforms. The river was transformed from mild to wild and it no longer looked like the same place. The rocky banks reminded me vaguely of the Murchison River in Western Australia's Kalbarri National Park, but the resemblance was fleeting. Soon the river would



RIVER WALKING

Go With the Flow

Andrew Bain follows Victoria's beautiful Mitchell River on a two-day walk



Mark Grundy in the atmospheric surrounds of Deadcock Den. **Right**, reflecting on the Mitchell River, in more ways than one. Jenny Grundy at the walk's beginning at Angusvale. All photos by the author

widen and flatten again, morphing regularly into short, sharp rapids like braids along its length.

We had gone less than 100 metres along the walking track out of Rock Creek camping area when we discovered we had company. Stretched to its full six-foot length across the path was a red-bellied black snake, savouring the last of the autumn heat. The snake wasn't going anywhere, so we detoured through the tea-tree and walked on, every branch and noise seeming like a reptile. The flood debris high above our heads offered further cause for thought.

The meanders of the Mitchell began again at the rapids' end, the river ordered into place by the sandstone cliffs that now also dragged the walking track away from the Mitchell's edge on to the hillsides. I looked behind—that backward glance you so often miss when walking—to be rewarded with a wonderful view back along the straight of the slalom rapids, the water magnesium-bright beneath the midday sun.

The track lingered high on the hillsides for great lengths of time, and it often felt as though we weren't on a river walk at all. We stared through open woodland at hillsides just like the one we were on but for the occasional gash of sandstone intruding through the bush. If you were to design the perfect track it would probably touch the river a few more times but it was pleasant regardless, contouring around the river bends, dipping in and out of butterfly-filled gullies but always keeping a respectful distance from the river.

Apart from glimpses of the Mitchell we could have been almost anywhere. The kilometres ticked by, changing little except in direction. It was repetitive but in no way dull. Indeed, it was in many ways a walking track typical of the Australian bush; you travel for so long through unchanging land, then suddenly there's a spectacular scene. Along the Mitchell River the scene is found at the Amphitheatre, which awaited us at the day's end.

But we first had to work for our reward. The climb to reach Mitchell Road—rather gloriously named given it was no more than a rugged, four-wheel-drive track—was an indication of the terrain to come. Luxuries such as contouring across hillsides were now behind us; we were into something like bush moguls, steep climbs that concluded in mocking descents.

This was not the only mockery to endure. Glimpses of the river revealed more than water, with enticing beaches forever seeming to line the opposite bank. We were conscious that they probably lined our bank as well, tucked away unseen below us, but this made them no more accessible. The thought that perhaps we'd strike one of these beaches gnawed at us but they remained as elusive as a thylacine.

We walked for about two kilometres along Mitchell Road before the track veered back down towards the river. By now we had discovered another folly of this 'river' walk: since leaving the slalom rapids at Rock Creek we hadn't seen any water. All the tributaries

had been dry and the Mitchell River had been scenery rather than a companion. Our drinking-water was gone.

From here the track dropped so steeply that we sensed it was pointing at water, a tributary deeper and stronger than the rest. The day had stilled to a stop and the Mit-

There were grand views of the Amphitheatre before we began the final haul up its slopes. The most impressive feature of the walk, the sandstone Amphitheatre is shaped as its name suggests, rock slides having peeled back its orange cliffs, dumping quarry-loads of rock at their feet. It was a scene out of



Exploring the banks of the Mitchell River at Rock Creek, which appears to live up to its name.

chell River was both glassy and glossy, the forest and sky painted perfectly on to its watery canvas.

Our descent ended at Cobbannah Creek, which was indeed flowing. A few metres from where we crossed, its waters became those of the Mitchell River. We filled our bottles and prepared our minds for the final climb, the toughest of the day.

character with anything we'd seen so far that day, more akin to glacial debris than a valley in the Australian bush.

The track zigzagged in behind the Amphitheatre, where rosellas flew by like flourishes of paint and a swamp wallaby watched curiously. Snakes had disappeared from our consciousness but it was now that a second snake appeared—so tiny as to be little more

than glorified string-sliding between us on the path.

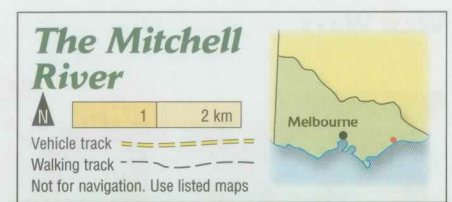
The zigzags ended at the stony ridge on top of the Amphitheatre where there remained a final grunt to Lookout Point, the views more than compensating for the effort. The sound of water reached us even here; this is said to be the Mitchell River's most testing set of rapids as it begins its long turn through Billy Goat Bend.

The camping ground abutting Lookout Point was empty and it was tempting to think that visitors to this spot were rare although the ferocity of the possums quickly assured us otherwise. Accustomed to easy pickings, they began their manoeuvres at dusk, crowding our area. Their attack came in darkness, scratching and clawing uselessly at our rucksacks while we were away at Lookout Point

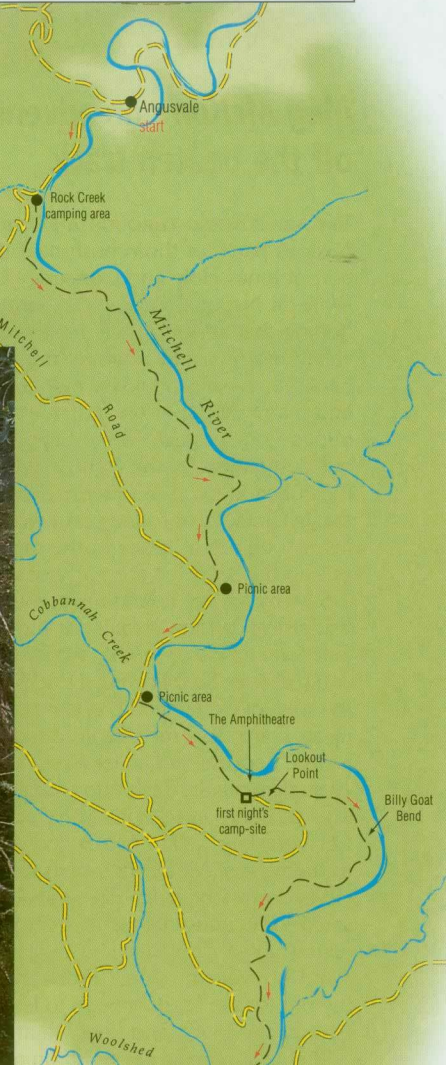
river reliefs. We did come to one of the Mitchell's grail-like beaches, its gritty, narrow bank seeming as good as a fluffy Queensland strand.

From this beach the track began its final climb, snaking up a gully thick with bush before easing down to the river bank again. From here it was an easy finish, the river flicking from placid to rapid and the path levelling off beside it.

At Woolshed Creek, a couple of hours from our camp at Lookout Point, the track offered options. We could simply plough up the path to its steep end, or deviate to the two sites that rivalled the Amphitheatre for attraction: the Den of Nargun and Deadcock Den.



With a greater flow of water and a little more rouge in the rocks, it could almost pass for a stray piece of the Kimberley.



savouring the glow of the full moon. Long after the sun had set, the landscape retained its form under the moon's pewter light. The river could be seen bending its way through the earth's creases, capped by the mist that had begun to fill the valley, merging with the smoke of a park burn-off. We hoped that the mist would still be there in the morning, packed into the valley below, but by dawn the wind had chased it away.

Our first walking task on this second day was to round Billy Goat Bend, a long, wide arc round the cliffs. It was a kind, flat beginning to the day, staring across at sandstone walls like the ruins of a city.

The day was brewing towards heat very early but we could at last anticipate some

Andrew Bain

is a Melbourne writer who spends too much time wandering when he should be working. He is the author of *Headwinds*, a book about a 20 000 kilometre cycling journey around Australia.



Mark Grundy descends into a gully near the arc of Billy Goat Bend.

The track to the Den of Nargun veered away from the main track but we continued the short distance to Woolshed Creek, only metres upstream from which is Deadcock Den. Of the two dens, Nargun is the more famous but Deadcock Den arguably more striking. With a greater flow of water and a little more rouge in the rocks, it could almost pass for a stray piece of the Kimberley.

Scrambling over boulder debris, we entered Deadcock Den's rocky enclosure where

water dribbled over a ledge and across a rock platform as expansive as a dance floor. In the protection of an overhang, we savoured this bit of outback in Victoria before heading into the Den of Nargun, another ledge from which dripped a waterfall barely worthy of the title.

Less colourful than Deadcock Den, the Den of Nargun is richer in legend, holding great cultural significance for the Gurnai/Kurnai Aboriginal people. A stone creature named Nargun was said to reside here, preying on anybody who came too close.

Our wanderers took us away from the shallow cave, up the arms of a spur to the Den of Nargun picnic area and the end of the beautifully lonely track.